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ABSTRACT

By 1985, almost 2,500 Ethiopian Jews, who call themselves Beta Israel, had settled in Israel, with more than 1,600 in permanent housing in 2 major areas. This mass immigration caused strains on Israeli society and on the immigrants. The Bernard van Leer Foundation funded the Community and Education Project for Beta Israel to assist in the absorption of Ethiopian Jews into Israeli society. Programs sponsored by the project included supervised children's play groups, morning and afternoon child care services, a homework assistance program, a home visiting program, and various adult education classes. The project received support from municipal social service agencies, but its relations with the Ethiopian community were hampered by internal differences in the community. Factors that affected the project included the absence of communal institutions in the Ethiopian community, and various community demands. As the project evolved, it developed an increased knowledge of the community served, professionalization of staff, and routinization of activities. Community changes that occurred during the course of the project included an increased autonomy of the immigrant community and its members, improved child nutrition, and greater independence for women. A review of the project considers funding issues and the moral dilemma that arises when a developmental agent becomes involves with another culture. A bibliography of 31 items is provided. (BC)

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Reflections on working with Ethiopian families in Israel

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Editorial history

This paper arises out of three years of interactive evaluation with the Community and Education project for *Beta Israel* working with Ethiopian immigrants in Beersheva, Israel, and supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. It has not been previously published. It aims to highlight some of the issues that occurred to the author in the process of producing the final evaluation report of the first phase of the project.

About the author

Michael Ashkenazi is Lecturer in Anthropology within the Department of Behavioural Sciences, Ben Gurion University, Beersheva, Israel. He received his doctorate from Yale University in 1983, and has been studying various issues concerned with the settlement of Ethiopian immigrants in Beersheva since then, as well as pursuing his interests in Japanese anthropology. He served as head of the evaluation team for Phase I of the *Beta Israel* project from 1985-1988, has published several papers and monographs on the problems of the immigrants, is co-editor of *Ethiopian Jews and Israel* (New Brunswick: Transaction Press) and is currently preparing a book on the subject, due to be published in 1992.

From 1988 to 1990 Michael Ashkenazi was Visiting Professor at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calgary, Canada.

About the project

Ethiopian Jews, who call themselves *Beta Israel* and are known as *Falashas* elsewhere, form a small community of about 32,000. During the late 1960s, some 2,000 members of this community had emigrated from Gonder and Tigray provinces in Ethiopia to Israel. By 1985, close to 16,000, almost half of the total Ethiopian Jewish population, had settled there. Of these, approximately 2,500 came to Beersheva, making up about two per cent of the town's population.

The mass immigration caused strains on Israeli society and more importantly, on the Ethiopian immigrants themselves. Ideologically, most Israelis subscribe to the idea that all Jews should live in Israel: official practice and several legal measures support that ideology, offering various forms of assistance and support to actual and potential immigrants. In reality, however, few Israelis go out of their way to make the average immigrant feel comfortable in Israel. The Ethiopian immigrants suffered from a number of problems that arose from this situation. Absorption centres which had originally been set up to assist immigrants from Western and European countries to adjust to life in Israel were used to dealing with single families: the Ethiopians arrived in large groups of several hundred a week. They arrived virtually as refugees, requiring special initial economic efforts, and few had any experience in dealing with a Westernised technological culture. Doubts were also cast by political and religious authorities in Israel on their motives and 'Jewishness'. Finally, the staffs of the various agencies involved with the Ethiopian immigrants initially had limited knowledge and little training for dealing with them and their particular problems.

As a response to the perceived distress of the Ethiopian immigrants, the Bernard van Leer Foundation in The Netherlands funded a special development project. The aim of the 'Community and Education Project for *Beta Israel*' (referred to hereafter as the Project) was to assist in the absorption of the *Beta Israel* in Israeli society. The particular intention of the Foundation in establishing the project was to improve the social and educational environment of young children in the Ethiopian immigrant community.

The object of this paper is to examine the factors that affected, and in some cases determined, how the project was structured and how it functioned during the first three years of its existence.

Bernard van Leer Foundation

Reflections on working with Ethiopian families in Israel

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REFLECTIONS ON WORKING WITH ETHIOPIAN FAMILIES IN ISRAEL

The Ethiopian Jewish community originated from the Gonder and Tigray Provinces of Ethiopia.[1] The 1960s and 1970s saw a steady flow of emigration: by 1979 some 2,000 Ethiopian Jews had emigrated to Israel.[2] By 1980, however, a major immigration wave was in motion, culminating in the mass clandestine movement organised by the Israeli government in 1984-85 called 'Operation Moses'. The drive to emigrate was a combination of 'push' factors – famine in Ethiopia and anti-Jewish activities by the Amhara majority – and 'pull' factors – the religious ideology of the *Beta Israel* which includes settling in Jerusalem and the ideology of the Israeli state, which emphasises the 'ingathering' of Jews in other countries.[3]

The relationship between the Ethiopian immigrants and 'veteran' Israelis – those resident in the country for a longer period and, with a few exceptions, not of Ethiopian origin – was and still is ambivalent. Although official ideology welcomes Jewish immigrants to the country and encourages their successful absorption into Israeli life, the reality is that many Israelis treat immigrants generally with a certain amount of disdain, and it can take a long time before any immigrant group is fully accepted into Israeli society. For the *Beta Israel*, problems arising from their form of religious practice,[4] and their colour[5] have created even higher hurdles for their acceptance by the man in the street, even though official bodies have been investing heavily in easing the transition.

By the late 1970s, the process of immigration to Israel had been routinised. Immigrants were entitled to certain subsidies and help from government and quasi-government agencies set up for the purpose. Subsidised immigrant hostels – absorption centres – provided newcomers with residences, Hebrew classes, some employment and retraining services, and a gradual immersion in Israeli society. These centres were run by the quasi-governmental Jewish Agency, colloquially known as the *Sochnut*, in cooperation (though marred by occasional political and bureaucratic in-fighting) with the two Ministries of Immigration and Absorption and of Labour and Social Services. Immigrants were expected to stay in these centres for one full year, sometimes extended or until such time as they were able to fend for themselves. During this period they were officially considered 'immigrants', which gave certain legal and financial benefits.

Most of the Ethiopian immigrants who arrived in the early 1980s were directed to specially formed absorption centres. Language training was started as usual, until it was discovered that the majority of Ethiopian immigrant adults had no formal education whatsoever. Job training or retraining encountered similar difficulties, as the Ethiopian immigrants had few marketable skills. Further problems arose when social workers found that the immigrants were initially unable to operate household appliances: a minor difficulty, but one which created great uproar in Israeli public opinion. The Ethiopian immigrants thus suffered from two major deficiencies which hindered their ability, adults and children alike, to adjust to Israeli society: a lack of economic basis and capability, and lack of education.[6]

1 For details of life in Ethiopia, see: Messing, S. (1982). *The story of Falashas: 'Black Jews' of Ethiopia.* Brooklyn: Balshon Printing Co.; and Schoenberger, M. (1975). *The Falashas of Ethiopia: An ethnographic study.* (dissertation) Cambridge: Cambridge University.

2 Rapaport, L. (1980). *The lost Jews: Last of the Ethiopia Falashas.* New York: Stein and Day.

3 Abbink, G.J. (1984). *The Falashas in Ethiopia and Israel: The problem of ethnic assimilation.* Nijmegen: ICSA Occasional papers, pp.103-25.

4 Waldman, M. (1983). 'Daat Chachamei Yisrael al Olei Etyopiya', (The opinion of the Jewish rabbis concerning Ethiopian immigrants) *Techumin: Torah, chevra, umedina* 4:314-26.

5 Munitz, S., Henik, A. and Priell, B. (1987). 'Colour, skin colour preferences, and self-colour identification among Ethiopian- and Israeli-born children' in Ashkenazi, M. and Weingrod, A., (eds) *Ethiopian Jews and Israel.* New Brunswick: Transaction.

6 Haklita, M. (1986). *Tuchnit Av Leklitat Yehudei Etyopiya* (Master plan for the absorption of Ethiopian Jews). Jerusalem: Ministry of Absorption.

Beersheva

Beersheva is a small city of some 110,000 residents, many of whom are former immigrants themselves. The economy is weak, with a relatively high rate of unemployment, and largely dependent on small manufacturing and service industries, with a few major employers such as the government, a university, and chemical industries. Most homes in the city, in common with the rest of Israel, are in apartments. There are a number of smaller satellite towns and agricultural settlements, few of which offer many sources of permanent employment.

By 1985, 2,500 Ethiopian immigrants were living in Beersheva, more than 1,600 of them in permanent housing in two major areas. Some of the earliest Ethiopian arrivals in Beersheva had settled in Hahida neighbourhood; most of these had permanent jobs, usually in manufacturing and services. A second group who had arrived later, were settled in Halehi-Shaul Hamelech neighbourhood, about one kilometre away. Other smaller groups were scattered throughout the town, usually in clusters of four or five families.

During the first three years of the project many members of the community were either unemployed or in job training. Those who were employed worked at unskilled or semi-skilled manufacturing jobs or in a number of unskilled service jobs. Some of the women worked in Beersheva or in satellite towns around Beersheva, almost all as low-paid, largely unskilled day-labour. Incomes were relatively low and almost universally supplemented by welfare, in the form of the National Insurance Guaranteed Income.

The *Beta Israel* Project

The Project was founded in an atmosphere of general worldwide interest in the Ethiopian immigrants. It was clear that the Ethiopian community was facing major problems in adjusting to Israeli society. Reports in the local press and on television almost uniformly portrayed the Ethiopian immigrants as a population under stress.[7] The Project was set up to provide programmes for improving the social and educational environment for young children, from birth to the age of eight, in an environment which would encourage cognitive, educational, and social growth for the children and their parents. In principle, the specific methods were largely left to the Project staff, to be worked out in conjunction with the immigrant community and with the formal agencies already working with the immigrants. One imperative was to affect the staffing of the project: as far as possible, positions in the project, as well as its direction, were to be provided from within the community itself.

7 See for example: Newman, S. (1987). 'Ethiopian Jewish absorption and the Israeli response: A two-way process', in Ashkenazi, M., and Weingrod, A., (eds) *op cit.*

In practice, however, the immigrant population was split by a number of political and social divisions.[8] The attempt to secure the cooperation of the community and to derive programme goals from its members was partly frustrated by these divisions – a problem further exacerbated by the general lack of cooperation from the upper echelons of the different absorption agencies.

8 See: Ashkenazi, M. (1988). 'Political organisation and resources among Ethiopian immigrants', *Social Science Information* 27(3): 371-90.

A Project Steering Committee of eleven people was finally established. It consisted of four members of the community and seven non-Ethiopian, veteran Israelis, most with academic backgrounds and/or experience in dealing with Ethiopian immigrants. The first real product of the Committee was the crystallisation of ideas for programmes to supplement official educational efforts which the Project could implement. In the long-run, however, the Committee membership proved unstable: various members withdrew, and in practice, both policy and supervision were maintained by a small group of non-immigrants, headed by the director.

Concurrently with the start of the Project, Amishav, a leading social-service funding agency in Israel, had initiated a training programme for Ethiopian

women who were hoping to qualify as nursing and childcare assistants. With the agreement of Amishav, the curriculum of the programme was modified to suit the Project's needs, and additional classes were added on informal child education. As a result, by October 1985 the Project's first programme got underway – supervised play groups in a rented apartment in the Shaul Hamelech neighbourhood, where the largest group of Ethiopian immigrants lived. Supervised by a small professional staff, the programme was run by eight newly trained and barely qualified Ethiopian women who had participated in the three-month Amishav course.

At the start of 1986, and after a certain amount of political wrangling inside the community, a new centre was opened in the Gevim community centre, to serve the Hahida and Moshe Sharet neighbourhoods. A new programme, offering morning childcare services for mothers studying Hebrew, was added at that centre. Also in early 1986, the absorption centre which had operated in Shaul Hamelech was turned into permanent housing and its residents were added to the Project's clients. A third programme centre was opened in the Hannah Senesh area some time later.

The core of the Project's activities at this time consisted of three programmes, all focusing on early childhood. A morning programme for very young children (to the age of three) offered various activities and a mid-morning snack to the children. It also encouraged the mothers' participation and allowed them a certain period of free time unencumbered by their small children. Their involvement was assured by a requirement that each mother devote some hours every month to working in the programme as a childcare assistant, directed by the centre manager.

Afternoon programmes were devoted to older children, and were designed to include a variety of supervised free-flow activities as well as a period of common activity, such as storytelling. A programme of homework assistance for the over-sixes was added later and was run by the Ministry of Education.

Another programme, which gradually assumed growing importance in the Project, was the Home Visiting Programme. Although many mothers and their children took part in the activities at the various centres, it became clear that there were a fairly large number of mothers who could not avail themselves of any of the services. Some of them had just given birth, others lived a prohibitive distance from a centre. The Home Visiting Programme was designed to reach that public by offering counselling services at home.

In addition to the programmes for children, the Project launched a number of community oriented programmes. These were directed at parents, and included language, cooking and sewing classes, and a social and learning programme for men. These programmes were initiated with two ends in mind: to involve the adult members of the community in the Project's activities as much as possible and to provide members of the community with skills which would help them in their struggle to become part of Israeli society. The programmes had differing degrees of success. Some, like the social and learning programme for men, were dropped completely, while others were modified as time went on. New activities included a supervised activity room for children at the Well Baby clinic frequented by both Ethiopian immigrant and veteran-Israeli mothers, assistance in a childcare project in another town, and the provision of interpreters for the health services.

All these activities shared two common denominators: to the greatest degree possible, members of the community were involved in the execution (and later, the planning) of the programmes; and all of the programmes were subject to ongoing reviews. These were intended to solve immediate and chronic problems, but the constant monitoring and feedback also created a climate in which programme activities, staff assignments, materials and toys were subject to

constant change. These two factors meant that when changes occurred in the Ethiopian immigrant community – when, in other words, the community was better able to meet the expectations of Israeli society – the Project was in a far better position to offer responsibility to, and accept input from, the Ethiopian immigrants than any other body working with them.

Ongoing relations: outside agencies and the immigrant community

The ability of the Project to function effectively depended to some degree on its relationships with other agencies involved in the absorption of Ethiopian immigrants, of which the Beersheva municipality was particularly important for the Project. At the working level, relationships with the municipality's social services office were generally good, and involved cooperative planning and execution of programmes. The same cannot be said about relationships with political appointees in the municipality, who were either uninterested, or hostile, to the operation of the Project. The most significant aspect of these relationships during the first phase was the Project's constant struggle to maintain its independence and to establish its professional credentials. A number of attempts were made by the official agencies to use the Project for funding their own operations, as the Bernard van Leer Foundation was seen as a potential source of funds. Cooperative programmes proposed by the agencies were almost all based on the assumption that funding would be provided by the Project, while professional direction would be provided by the agencies. Besides that, the professional competence of the Project was called into question because most of the operating staff were Ethiopian immigrants lacking formal education.

Of all the Project's external ties, however, none were so crucial, given both its mandate and its working requirements, as its relationship with the Ethiopian immigrant community. In fact, the word 'community' is a misnomer here. Because of internal differences inherited from their native country, and political differences that surfaced among the immigrants in Israel,[9] a true 'community' in the sense of generally accepted communal institutions and community spirit had not emerged in the early stages of the Project.

9 Ashkenazi, M. (1988). *op cit.*

Given the existence of these various factions within the community, close relations with any particular individual or group inevitably led to charges that the Project was biased. During the first two and a half years, numerous attempts were made to gain access to the Project's financial resources and to control its operations. Since the attempts were often mounted via membership in the Steering Committee, little effective decision-making power was vested in that committee. By the middle of the third year, however, it had become clear to the community and to the outside agencies that the Project would not allow itself to be used in any political or economic battles within the immigrant community, between the Ethiopians and the authorities, or between various official agencies: at that point, most leaders of factions in the community withdrew from active participation and interference in Project affairs. As a direct result, interested parents not involved in the factional fighting gradually joined the Steering Committee, so that it eventually became a forum in which substantive issues about childcare and about the community could be, and were, articulated.

Only towards the end of this initial period was some sort of communal consensus established. This came about partly because of changes in the community itself, including the emergence, or re-emergence, of institutions such as the community elders, and partly as a result of the Project's steadfast refusal to be drawn into political arguments or to allow itself to be used as an economically exploitable resource.

The Project was not passive about its relationship with the community. It actively sought to promote its activities, and to make community members aware

of its programmes. One way of doing this was through outreach activities by Project staff. In addition to surveying the community for potential needs and defining potential client populations, these outreach workers encouraged individuals to attend Project activities. While the results were uneven, the cumulative effect was to bring most families into at least some contact with the Project. Moreover, as they became increasingly familiar with the community members, the outreach workers were often able to alert the Project, or other agencies, to specific individual and family problems.

Factors affecting the Project

The basic environment in which the Project was operating has been summarised elsewhere.[10] Some of the features of the Ethiopian immigrants' position would be common to groups of immigrants in and outside of Israel; other aspects were specific to the interplay between Ethiopian immigrants and Israeli society. No attempt is made here to arrange the factors in order of their assumed 'importance' in affecting the situation, or to discuss the effects of these factors outside the boundaries of the Project. It should be recognised, however, that these elements acted in a complex interrelationship and not in isolation.

Absence of communal institutions

10 See for example: Abbink, G.J. (1984). *op cit*; Ashkenazi, M. and Weingrod, A. (1984). *Ethiopian Immigrants in Beer Sheva: An anthropological study of the absorption process*. Highland Park: KAEJ.; Halper, J. (1985). 'The absorption of Ethiopian immigrants: A return to the Fifties', *Israel social science research* 3(1-2).; Shabtai, M. (1985). *'A baby in one hand and a book in the other': The immigration and absorption experience of Ethiopian children*. (MA thesis). Haifa: Haifa University.; Wagaw, T. (1987). 'The Immigration and settlement of Ethiopian Jews in Israel', *Middle East Review* 20(2): 41-8.

Of particular importance for both the immigrants and the Project was the absence of any communal institutions. The word 'community' has been used throughout this paper, but it must be emphasised again that the term is not used in a technical sense. The Ethiopian immigrants in Beersheva came from a number of different settlements in Ethiopia. There were few complete extended families; authority structures had been disrupted as the families had been, by the process of emigration. Traditional patterns of work, association, law, religion, and custom had been broken, either by immigration or by the legal, technological, political, and economic realities of their new country. Communal institutions did not exist at first, and only began emerging in embryonic form as the Project progressed.

The absence of these institutions clearly hindered the Project, making it difficult to mobilise the community as a whole. Individuals often acted with only their own interests, or at best those of a small circle, in mind, thus limiting successful communal action. Moreover, the authority, or seeming authority of specific persons in the community tended to be ephemeral. As result, the only way for the Project to maintain ties with the community was on an *ad hoc* and personal basis.

Community demands

The mandate of the *Beta Israel*, liked other Foundation-supported projects, is child-oriented. However, it is recognised that children are embedded in their communities, and that improvement in a community (however measured) stands to benefit the children of that community as well. This represents an inherent dilemma for any project: to what degree should it agree to the demands, and the expressed needs of a community? While these demands rarely conflict directly with early childhood needs, they can and do siphon off resources from child-oriented programmes. This problem also arose in the *Beta Israel* Project, as the following examples show.

The Project was approached with a request to provide a class for Bible studies, and room for a synagogue for older members of the community. The request was partly prompted by ethnic division within the community. Some of the elders, from Tigray, felt they were being slighted in the Ethiopian synagogue, which was dominated by immigrants from Gonder. The Tigrean elders constituted a relatively cohesive and homogeneous group. They were also expected to be

long-time residents in the neighbourhoods, in which all of them had families. The Project decided to support their request: a volunteer was eventually found to teach the Bible studies class, and the main room of the Project office was used by them as a meeting and prayer place.

Another request for assistance came from a group of young men, seeking sponsorship to pay for outfits and equipment for a football team. While the conflicts which existed in the community extended through the two major groups of Ethiopian immigrants, by and large one faction was dominant in each of the two neighbourhoods. The request for support of a football team came from the young men of one of the neighbourhoods. Although they could and did, claim that the team was communal, there was good reason to suppose that only members of one given faction would participate. Their proposal was rejected, partly because it required the project to invest sums that would have to be taken away from other programmes, but also – and to my mind more importantly – because backing the football team would clearly have been a divisive move. It would have exacerbated relations between the two factions, and made the Project's position, which was already difficult enough, almost untenable.

The third request came from a number Ethiopian immigrant students who wanted help in establishing a dance troupe to perform Ethiopian folk-dance – one of the few ways the Ethiopian immigrants had of displaying their culture (in the popular sense of the word) before a critical Israeli audience. Although the students' economic problems were not as acute as those of the town's residents (they were, in their own estimation as well as that of others, 'on their way up') they did require moral support, a sense of pride that could be displayed before veteran Israelis, and a means of cohesion that would help them assimilate (folk dancing is greatly valued and appreciated in Israel) and, at the same time, display their Ethiopian identity.

Their request for assistance was turned down by the Project. The reasons were both financial (costs included costumes, music, and later, probably, transportation) and the feeling in Project administration that the troupe, run as it was by students who were not full participants in the community, would have contributed little to solving the community's problems. It is conceivable, however, that the effort of maintaining such a troupe would have both added to community pride, and helped to some degree in the integration of the Ethiopian students into the settled community. In view of the importance of providing a cadre of educated Ethiopian immigrants as teachers and role models, this would probably have benefited the community in the long run.

Clearly, various factors must make up the decision whether to assent to community requests, and invest in extraneous programmes. The question of the drain such programmes will have on other activities is a prime consideration. But beyond that, motives behind the request, the current community situation, and other local factors must be taken into account. In the final analysis, consideration must also be given to long-term effects, and to a general investment in goodwill.

Something which staff members were often not consciously aware of, and yet which affected the Project greatly, was the fact that most of the immigrants did not see the Project as an essential institution worth preserving and furthering. The importance of child play and of early child education, particularly the loosely structured education offered by the Project was, for cultural reasons, not evident to the immigrants. The Project, in general, was viewed as a useful institution for babysitting, perhaps as an employer (but only of women) and as a possible provider of resources. The things that are really important to the Ethiopian immigrants are employment and housing; immigration of relatives still in Africa; and acceptance for themselves and their families within the Israeli environment. Since the Project could not, and did not, assist directly in any of these needs, its importance for the immigrant community was marginal. As a

result, disruptions of programme activities, destructive behaviour towards one another, the staff and materials, and child truancy, were not considered serious by parents.

Even in the one area that the Project claimed as its own – education – it was effectively limited by its own educational approach. The Ethiopian immigrants, adults as well as children, were aware of their need for education. It has always been viewed as a major key to success in Israel by the immigrants, as well as by veteran Israelis and the immigration authorities. The Project, however, provided education largely for that part of the population – women and small children – for whom education was not considered essential. Furthermore, even the activities were, to them, not obviously a form of education, involving play, games and toys, none of which are 'serious' education in the community's eyes.

Cooperation with other agencies

A major problem that had been anticipated before the Project was launched was the need for cooperation with agencies involved in the settlement of Ethiopian immigrants in Beersheva. It was clear from the start that the Project could only be temporary, and that other groups and agencies, preferably the community itself, would take over the programmes in due course. What also rapidly became clear was that if the Project was to survive as a coherent whole, and as a concept, it would first have to prove itself to potential cooperators in two important ways.

First, the Project needed to prove its administrative and actual independence. For many of the agencies that were dealing with the Ethiopian immigrants in Beersheva, the Project appeared at first sight to be little more than a funding agency. Only the repeated and determined assertion of administrative independence put an end to attempts by certain agencies to dominate the Project's resources.

Second, there was a need for the Project to demonstrate its professional competence. The obvious and expressed need of the community for formal education was recognised by all. The more subtle requirements of laying a proper cognitive, social, and perceptual foundation for educational and economic success were not. Since the Project had elected to emphasise this second need, it was viewed with disdain, bordering on contempt, by the 'official' agencies, which focused on formal education. Moreover, the use of untrained and, at first, barely competent Ethiopian workers gave the Project a 'non-professional' image. As a result, the willingness of other agencies to cooperate with the Project was initially very limited. That image was only dispelled, and the Project's cooperation actively solicited, when it became clear that the Project was unquestionably successful in training and motivating its staff, and in achieving its own educational objectives with the children.

Measures of change

It was understood from the beginning that the Project would evolve. Though there was agreement about the scope of Project affairs, there was little foreknowledge about how the programmes initiated and carried out by the Project would operate within that scope. As a result, planning tended to be reactive. Different programme structures, activities, staff assignments, and allocations of responsibility were tried, changed, sometimes discarded, sometimes retried after an initial failure. In a normal organisational environment such constant changes might have been disastrous. In the case of the Project, however, it proved serendipitous. The flexibility of the Project meant that the rapid changes that occurred in the community, and the growing competence of the community and its members were easily accommodated. Rather than being disruptive, the reactive planning actually encouraged greater participation by members of the community, more inputs from them, and a growing reliance on

them for dealing with Project issues and problems. If the community members had found it difficult at first to conceptualise pre-school educational problems, or to meet some of the expectations of Israeli society about parent-educational facilities, by the end of the first three years they were well on their way to assuming responsibility for overseeing much of the content and process of Project activities. The process of change in the Project can best be summarised by looking at three major elements: knowledge, professionalisation, and the routinisation of Project affairs. Together, they present a coherent picture of internal changes.

Knowledge

In this case, knowledge consisted both of information which the Project possessed about the immigrant community and knowledge possessed by the community about the Project and about their social environment. The evolution in Project programmes reflected, in addition to changes which the community itself was undergoing, a growing understanding by the Project staff of the needs and abilities of the community and its members.

At the outset of the Project, few of the senior staff had any real understanding of the major problems and issues of immigrant life as seen by the immigrants. With time, a greater familiarity and, consequently, sensitivity to immigrant problems emerged. This came about by a formal process of information-gathering (through surveys conducted by the outreach workers, through information channelled by staff of municipal agencies etc.) and by the informal penetration resulting from daily interaction with the community. This provided knowledge, at a general level, about the real issues and real needs of the community. At a more specific level it provided information about the particular needs of individuals and groups within the community.

Few of the Ethiopian immigrants had been in Israel for more than five years when the Project began, many for much less. The majority lacked not only basic education, but also a familiarity with Israel, and with the Hebrew language. By the end of the three-year period, many had become fluent in Hebrew; certainly all had had time to adjust to, or to at least learn how to function in, Israeli society. This affected their perception of the Project, as well as their individual and community needs, and their ability to express them.

Professionalisation

One of the most significant changes in the Project was the gradual professionalisation of the staff as a whole, and of the Ethiopian immigrant para-professionals in particular. At the start of the Project, very few of the supervisory staff were childcare professionals; as activities in the Project became more regular, however, most of these non-professionals dropped out, and professional childcare specialists took their place. Gradually, these specialists became much more aware of, and experienced in dealing with, the particular problems and issues surrounding the Ethiopian immigrant community, thus improving their skill as professional staff.

Far more important, however, were the changes in the para-professional staff. Apart from a few veteran Israelis and some overseas volunteers, most of the para-professionals were Ethiopian immigrant women. The initial training which they undertook before starting work on the Project was continued during the first three years. This involved in-house training sessions run by senior Project staff and other professionals, a regular programme of hands-on study at a teacher training facility in Beersheva, and a programme of courses at the Sapir Regional College in professional subjects and Hebrew, intended to offer the para-professionals an opportunity to qualify for Ministry of Labour certificates. The community outreach workers were put under the direct supervision of a non-Ethiopian professional, and were also gradually trained in their roles.

Just as important as the regular training programme was the commitment of the Project's administration to relinquish authority to the para-professional staff when they were ready, willing, and able to assume that responsibility. All the para-professional workers were evaluated at regular intervals. Their willingness to assume responsibility was a function of their own self-confidence, which gradually increased as they became more competent in their tasks. Their ability was tested incrementally, by offering the opportunities for responsibility and for professional advancement. Although the process was lengthy and not without failures, the end result was a growing professionalism in the para-professional workers, and the assumption of independent supervisory positions in the Project by some of them.

One important result of this process of professionalisation was the change in the community's view of the Project. At first complex community dynamics and envy of those employed in the Project, had caused opposition to the para-professional workers. This envy was gradually replaced by pride and confidence in the Project, as it represented the only organisation in Beersheva in which Ethiopian immigrants played a prominent role. Moreover, as their professionalism grew, and with it their self-confidence, the para-professional workers were less vulnerable (or perhaps merely less sensitive) to pressures exerted from the community.

Routinisation

When the Project began, its staff were forced to assimilate a great deal of information – about the immigrant children's behaviour, about the community, about the value of some activities – and to keep adapting the programmes accordingly. Slowly regular procedures were worked out for the various activities and the programmes became routinised. This helped establish the Project as a stable entity within the immigrant community. Part of the immigrants' orientation problems in Israeli society has been traced to the lack of predictable behaviour and regular responses by the absorption agencies.[11] The Project, in contrast, worked hard to present a consistent set of responses to the immigrants' requests and problems. It abided strictly by its own guidelines, and performed its task within self-imposed but coherent, and relatively constant, parameters. As time passed the Project, its facilities and its modes of operation became a recognised fixture in the immigrants' lives. As a result, the functions and the limitations of the Project became better defined in the minds of community members.

The Project and changes in the community

One important development, from the point of view of the Project, was the gradual assumption of local autonomy by the community and by individuals within it. As far as the community was concerned, the growing confidence of its members to deal with Israelis and the Israeli establishment was reflected in their ability to interact with the Project. Whether the Project actually fostered or helped bring about this autonomy is hard to judge. Certainly it offered an opportunity for measured judgement of 'things Israeli' (for example, in the various courses offered, in the types of childcare, in the chances to participate in its activities) allowing community members, particularly women, to assume and ascertain autonomy in a 'safe' environment. In their work and family lives their ability to choose and not be penalised severely for a wrong choice, was otherwise extremely limited. The Project, precisely because it was peripheral, allowed for a great deal of non-threatening experimentation.

As well as allowing for the development of individual and community autonomy, interacting with the Project brought about or increased other processes of change in the Ethiopian immigrant community. Some of the changes were overt. For example, cooking and eating patterns enforced or taught

11 Abbink, G.J. (1983). '*Sagad* celebrations in Ethiopia and Israel: Continuity and change of a *Falasha* religious holiday', *Anthropos*, 78: 789-810; Adler, I. and Kimor, R. (1987). *Social absorption: Ethiopian immigrants in community centers (a research report)*. Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies; Ashkenazi, M. and Weingrod, A. (1984). *op cit*; Ezer Gad, B. (1987). 'Cross-cultural misunderstandings: The case of Ethiopian immigrants in Israeli society', in Ashkenazi, M., and Weingrod, A., (eds) *op cit*; Zipstein, D., Lichtmeir, M., and Kalanit, E. (1982). 'Avodah kehilatit vekvutzatit im olim Falashim' (Community work with Falasha immigrants), *Alim*, 31-9.

in the Project were the Israeli, not the Ethiopian norm. In late 1986 a high incidence of child malnutrition was detected in the immigrant community. This was a consequence of three factors: an abundance of high-sugar snack foods available at shops; the absence of traditional grains and foodstuffs which would normally have provided for the most necessary nutritional requirements; and the employment of both parents, which meant that children were left to their own devices or actually encouraged to eat snack foods. The Project reacted by providing cooking classes, as well as light meals for the morning programmes. Since the menus were devised by the (non-Ethiopian) teachers on the basis of foods familiar to them, and ingredients available in Israel, the diet tended to be modified towards a common Israeli pattern. The intention was to teach proper nutrition, and to provide better nourishment to the children and families, but the method tended to favour dietary change rather than just nutritional awareness. Similar changes could be detected in the immigrants' dress codes, and in the relationship and modes of expression between children and their parents.

More subtle changes are no less important. Rather than being subordinate to their men, women were encouraged in direct and indirect ways by the Project (as well as by the nature of Israeli society) to be more equal. The values of later marriage and smaller families were discussed. Education, literacy, and independence were rewarded. All of these changes include a disruption, or at least modification, of traditional patterns. This raises the question of the degree to which any project is justified in moulding a people's culture. Can such cultural disruption be avoided? Should it be avoided at all costs?

Although the community was obviously ambivalent about replacing their culture with an Israeli one, and even opposed some changes strongly, it was apparent to all, the Ethiopian immigrants included, that economic and educational changes inevitably brought about a disruption of Ethiopian culture. Conscious attempts by the Project to maintain that culture were unsuccessful. In the Project's early days, the Steering Committee had suggested recruiting the help of community elders in educating the children. However, the elders' lack of Hebrew, and the deterioration of relations between elders (who had difficulty adjusting to Israel) and younger people, including children (who generally adjusted much faster) had seriously demoralised the elders. The attempt failed, and the ability of the elders to function in the community revived only much later.

There is, of course, no simple or complete answer to the problem of directed culture change. On the one hand, social scientists do not know enough about the various relationships of cultural and social factors. On the other, there is a strong moral component in deciding whether or not to interfere with cultural practices. The Ethiopian immigrants are painfully aware that many aspects of their traditional way of life are at variance with Israeli norms. Moreover, they are also aware that there is a relationship between these differences and their access to rewards and resources in Israel. They are sensitive to, and have taken steps to hide, those aspects of their own culture – valuable as they may feel them to be – that they know the Israeli public considers undesirable and even repugnant.[12] There is also a converse to this effect. Those factors that the Ethiopian immigrants identify as being positively sanctioned in Israeli life are openly supported. One such instance, of course, is religion, and the strong emphasis most Ethiopian immigrants place on normative Jewish values and practices is witness to that. Another area which helps enhance their image is the emphasis on folk craft, folk dance, and similar activities, which are viewed as a legitimate and even important part of an individual's or group's unique character in Israel.

Generalising from the *Beta Israel* experience

The *Beta Israel* Project was intended to help the community of Ethiopian immigrants in Beersheva adapt to their new social and economic surroundings. The Project focused on a limited set of problems – those related to young children – leaving other issues to be dealt with by a number of government and

12 Ashkenazi, M. (1988). *op cit.*

social agencies. There was also a clear understanding by the staff of the Project and by the funding agency that the lessons learned from the operation of a broad range of programmes could, and should, be applied in other communities.

The degree to which the experience of the *Beta Israel* Project can be generalised must be examined with caution. The stages that the Project went through were not, I believe, inevitable, but were the result of specific factors emerging in a certain sequence in this particular case. The factors can be identified as: (1) knowledge (the project's knowledge of the community, the community's knowledge of the project); (2) the presence (or absence) of community institutions; (3) the degree of cooperation from outside agencies; (4) external changes in the community concerned; and (5) an active ideology and practice fostering change, adaptation, and empowerment (in the sense used by Ruth Paz).[13]

13 Paz, R. (1990). *Paths to empowerment.* The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation, p.1.

The variability of these factors implies that not every project would follow the same course. The ability to predict what will happen in a given project is a function of the interaction of the five factors. Basically, the more negative these factors are (i.e. no knowledge, no community institutions, no cooperation from outside agencies, no changes in the community driven by external factors, and an ideology that does not encourage, or seriously discourages, change and empowerment), the less impact a project is likely to have. Obviously, the *Beta Israel* Project did not start from such a minimalist position.

Objectives

The basic question behind any development project must be how to formulate a set of clearly defined, morally acceptable, and operationally executable objectives. While in theory this question seems easy to address, in practice the formulation of such objectives is built on a foundation of knowledge and ability that only develops with experience. Many problems, and even objectives, became clarified in the *Beta Israel* Project only after a series of painful trials and errors. Perhaps a more relevant question would be how to construct a series of operational objectives that are likely to produce as much benefit as possible, while limiting or controlling potential harm. In practice, I suspect, that that is what emerges in the process of every good project. Ultimate objectives need to be subordinated, at some level, to the requirements of the moment, without the objectives themselves being lost from sight. This in turn requires a sense of balance mediating between operational requirements, perhaps few of which can be foreseen, and major goals, which have to be crafted on the basis of previous, and expert, knowledge.

Another problem is the degree to which a project should focus on the primary, immediate needs of a client community; should projects supply what appear to be marginal or long-term needs (the two are often conflated, given the habit of bureaucratic agencies to prefer immediate results)? Here the choice is partly a technical one but, more importantly, also a moral one. Obviously, when primary needs are not being met, any available assistance must be directed towards supplying them, if at all possible. In situations such as *Beta Israel*, where many immediate needs were supplied by external agencies (albeit, one may claim, ineptly), then apparently marginal needs, and ones that are likely to yield results only in the long-run, assume more importance. In other words, in so far as government or semi-governmental agencies supply primary needs, it seems that the mandate of funding agencies should (in a moral sense, not merely because it is practicable) lie in projects aimed at long-term results, such as informal education.

Cultural change

The question of imposed cultural change must also be addressed by any development project. To the degree that members of a culture feel strongly about

their inheritance, and to the degree that they feel modernisation threatens that culture, one might expect to find them opposing formal education. They may also oppose the types and sorts of informal education advocated by, among others, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, since both come from outside the population concerned, and can be conceived of by them as an imposition. What is an issue here is the degree of control the target population can exercise over important aspects of their lives such as the education of their children. While the need for formal educational attainments may be recognised, there is also fear of them, because they disrupt traditional patterns, as has been the case for the Ethiopian Jews in Israel. On the other hand, traditional patterns are sometimes undesirable in a developmental perspective. They may perpetuate practices or power relationships that, in an absolute sense, are distasteful, developmentally hampering, or even damaging. The development agent here, as well as elsewhere, is faced with a moral dilemma: to what degree, and under what circumstances may he peddle his view to the subject of that development?

The problem is aggravated because the perspectives – the knowledge – of the development agent and of the subject population are different. The development agent presumably knows what the objectives of the development programme are, as well as the cultural requirements of his or her society. The target population knows its own cultural preferences, and may well know what it wants, but may not be able to identify or characterise the means and, more importantly, the costs associated with the process of development. In the particular context of migration, it seems obvious that the subject of development – the immigrant – must adapt as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, this quite often means that disruptive changes will take place without any guarantee that the immigrant population will be accepted. This is true even when the agent of development can clearly identify those specific areas in the subject population's culture that need to be changed for even a minimal acceptance and adaptation (and hopefully much more than that). It also seems obvious that the absorbing population should make allowances, and even adapt some of its social behaviours and expectations to the immigrants. In practice, sadly, the process depends almost completely on the ability of the immigrants to adapt to the society into which they have moved.

The final decision, to change a culture or not is not wholly in the hands of the actors, whether the members of the culture or those intervening in it. Decisions, assuming they can be made, are *ad hoc*. As a general rule the only suggestion that can be made is adherence to the rule of minimal intervention, and, to the degree possible, sharing the concern with members of the community. As the *Beta Israel* experience, at least, demonstrates, members of a developing community quite often have at least some idea of the acceptable limits of their behaviour in new surroundings, and, within limits, are anxious to adapt themselves.

Implications for funding agencies

The Bernard van Leer Foundation's projects emphasise that informal education is important as a supplement for most formal school systems. This is particularly true in cases like the Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, where the home and social environment provide little, if anything, in the way of informal and cognitive stimulation for the child. It seems clear, for instance, that such informal and supplementary education is especially important in situations where parents are subject to particular stress or where parents are absent, such as in refugee situations. One would also assume that priority should be given to informal schooling in those environments or educational systems where no mechanisms are provided for supplementary or special education for vulnerable populations like immigrants, or the poor. In these cases, the value of the informal education supplied by such projects may be even greater, since they would not, presumably, be otherwise available elsewhere.

There is, however, a negative side to this coin. First and foremost is the acknowledgement that it is *formal* education, with its skills, and no less with its diplomas and official recognition, that is the elementary passport for personal and even communal advancement. It could be argued that a truly successful supplementary programme is one that boosts, in measurable form, the performance of its recipients in the formal education system. A second argument involves the choices available to the client population. I would expect (and this is a hypothesis that requires testing) that the more educated a population is, the more it would recognise the need, or could be made aware of the need, for informal education. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely this population which would also be able, with little extra effort of its own, to supply such needs. The obverse is also true: a less well-educated population would be less likely to opt for supplementary informal education, even if the need were felt, because the massive barriers of initial educational difficulties in the formal sphere are only too obvious. Such parents would, I expect, almost inevitably demand concrete indications of success, preferably *immediate* success, from any supplementary programme.

Finally, there is a practical consideration. Funds available for education, including supplementary education, are inevitably limited, and it is therefore very important to focus the available resources for the best long-term outcomes.

These competing arguments are cumulative, rather than neutralising: the issue of funding and the question of felt need must be addressed simultaneously. I would suggest that the answer, for funding agencies, like the Bernard van Leer Foundation, lies in another factor: that of time. The effects of supplementary educational assistance in reading, writing, arithmetic, and other crucial parts of the formal curriculum can be measured in the short term. In contrast, the effects of informal education are measured rather in the long term, extending well into adulthood. In other words, the effects of childhood deprivation in cognitive development, play and imagination, take their toll at much farther remove than do the effects of deprivation in formal learning. Moreover, the effects of such deprivation, because they are both long-term and rather subtle, are difficult to detect and trace, and even more difficult to demonstrate.

For projects like those supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, it is probably necessary to be able to demonstrate the long-term effects of the presence or absence of informal development. This depends partly on having valid and reliable data (e.g. the results of several longitudinal, preferably cross-cultural, studies) and on emphasising the long-term aspect for potential populations. The second prescription is obviously more difficult than the first, and in practice, it is necessary to modify the presentation and operation of projects in order to show short-term, as well as medium- and long-term gains.

This leads to a final point. In the first three years of the *Beta Israel* Project, it was barely possible to trace the effects of the programmes. Few of the changes seen in the Ethiopian immigrant community can be unambiguously accredited to the Project: other factors, such as length of residence, may count for as much or more. Three or six years are sufficient for experimental purposes to evaluate the effects of intervention in formal educational systems: after all, testing is inherent in the formal educational atmosphere, so, test data are readily available. Such a time span, however, is not sufficient for examining the effects of informal and cognitive development programmes for children. If funded programmes are directed strictly at auxiliary and remedial formal education, there is no problem. If, however, they are devoted to something communal and developmental in the wider sense, then short-term efforts are unlikely to yield the desired results. It seems, therefore, that the thrust of such project programmes should be directed towards the long-term, and to the formal development of testing procedures to evaluate programmes in a comparative framework.

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